Neutralization of Vowel Length in Imst German
Christiane Kaden
Indiana University, Department of Germanic Studies/Linguistics Department
ckaden@indiana.edu
oral presentation or poster presentation

My paper investigates the distribution of contrastive long and short vowels and their neutralization in stressed syllables in Imst German, a South Bavarian dialect spoken in and around the city of Imst, Austria and as described by Schatz (1897). Contrastive vowel length is preserved only before geminates (1) but it is neutralized to long vowels in open syllables (2) and in monosyllabic words with a simple coda (3).

(1) contrastive vowel length before geminates

[ʃːf.ə]  ‘to sleep’  
[ʃːf.ə]  ‘to accomplish’

(2) long vowels in open syllables

[jpɔː.ɾa]  ‘to save’ 
[wiː.sə]  ‘meadow’

(3) long vowels in monosyllabic words ending in simple coda

[ɾɔː:t]  ‘red’ 
[tsuːɡ]  ‘train’

Vowel length is neutralized to short vowels in syllables closed by a simple coda (polysyllabic words) (4) or in a complex coda (monosyllabic words) (5).

(4) short vowels in closed syllables in polysyllabic words

[ʃaf.tig]  ‘juicy’ 
[pir.xə]  ‘birch tree’

(5) short vowels in monosyllabic words closed by complex coda

[smt]  ‘function’ 
[walt]  ‘world’

I will argue that the observed patterns of neutralization and the preservation of the length contrast only before geminates are due to the interaction of high ranked prosodic markedness constraints (STRESS-TO-WEIGHT [STW], WEIGHT-BY-POSITION [WBP] and *3µ) and mora-faithfulness constraints (MAX-µ, DEP-Cµ and DEP-Vµ). High ranked STW requires all stressed syllables to be heavy. It can be fulfilled by either a long vowel in an open syllable or a moraic coda plus short vowel in a closed syllable. Short vowels will be lengthened in open syllables, long vowels will be shortened in closed syllables. Neutralization to either long or short vowels is the result of the interaction of STW, WBP and *3µ and should actually rather be seen as neutralization to the unmarked stressed syllable, which is bimoraic. A vowel length contrast before geminates is preserved by the ranking MAX-µ >> *3µ >> DEP-Cµ, DEP-Vµ, so that trimoraic syllables can surface only when an underlying long vowel is followed by an underlying geminate. By contrast, derived trimoraic syllables are not allowed. This is an instance of Derived Environment Blocking (Hall 2006) where a certain structure is only allowed to surface when it comes from the underlying representation whereas the same structure, when derived, cannot surface as such. Another prosodic markedness constraint (*FINAL-Cµ) penalizes word-final moraic consonants so that in monomoraic words with a simple coda the vowel has to be lengthened to fulfill STW. With a complex coda, the first (non-final) consonant of the coda cluster can receive a mora and hence the vowel is never lengthened in that context. Final geminates remain moraic, however (another instance of Derived Environment Blocking).
REFERENCES